

Why Book Selection by Librarians No Longer Matters

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In the past building collections was central to what libraries did. It was critical to their effectiveness that they have the books that their users need when they needed them. That meant purchase books in anticipation of need so that they would be available waiting on the shelf.

To accomplish this, libraries hired expert librarians who used their knowledge of a subject and judgement to predict which books from the universe of possibilities would be most likely to be needed or wanted by the library's local clientele. In academic libraries, as demonstrated by the University of Pittsburgh study and others like it, expert selection lead to a success rate of 50% to 60% if success is judged on the circulation of a selected item at least once.¹ Interestingly, nearly sixty years ago the Fussler and Simon study showed that the only reliable predictor of future book use, though far from perfect, was past book use, so we have known for a long time that if a book doesn't circulate at the beginning of its life, it is unlikely to circulate later.²

To be fair, in large research libraries circulation was not always the goal. In some case the goal was not to build a collection of books that would be used, but rather to build a collection of all of the books on a topic. In these cases, the expert selector was not hired to predict which books would be used in the future, rather, their expertise was in identifying and acquiring the rare and unique items required to accumulate a comprehensive collection. In all but the largest research libraries, this mode of collecting has always been the exception rather than the rule.

In most case the expert librarian's role was to predict the future use of books and by doing so maximize the use of the library's collection budget. This was satisfying and rewarding work, especially for people who liked books and had an interest in the subject. But people are remarkably poor at predicting the future and, as demonstrated by book use studies, of library selectors capacities are not an exception. It is in fact likely that book use studies over-estimate the quality of selection as many users likely settle for what they can find even when is not exactly what they were looking for.

The use of approval plans was a primitive attempt to systematize book selection. It was originally design to limit and refine the universe that expert selectors would consider or "approve" for purchase. Later the selector was taken out of the individual selection decision and their expertise was used only to create a profile of what was to be purchased.

What has changed? Prediction about the future use of a book and using this prediction as the basis for a purchase decision only matters if the time required to acquire the book is greater than the time the user who needs the book is willing to wait for it. Thus, an inventory is needed

if delivery times are long and unnecessary if delivery times are short. With electronic books, there is no delivery time. With electronic books delivery is instantaneous. With print-on-demand and overnight shipping most print books can be delivered in 24 to 48 hours, which meets the needs of many users. This means that prediction of possible future use whether by expert librarian selectors or by algorithms, such as approval plans, is unnecessary. No prediction is necessary if the needed books can be delivered quickly enough to satisfy the person needing the book.

There are still cases where needed items cannot be provided fast enough and cases where the aim is not use, but to build the comprehensive collection (and these cases likely overlap). Here, as we have noted, it is not prediction that is important but rather deep subject expertise and relationships and connections that matter. In these cases, selection or choosing on the basis of predicted future use is not central to the role.

So, while librarians often find selecting books for their collections fulfilling work, it is no longer necessary. Libraries that continue to allow the practice to continue are wasting the key resource of librarian time and energy.

Another way of thinking about this is that librarians are ceding selection to the crowd. The library's users are selecting the collection. This is more efficient than librarian selection because every user selected book will be used at least once. And, if Fussler and Simon's observations on book use remain in effect and past use remains the best predictor of future use this will be even more the case.

For some the loss of librarian involvement in selection will be an unfortunate development. One more professional activity is lost. This is the wrong way to think about what is happening. Rather, the application of technology and new ways of thinking about and organizing the book and article delivery function has become more efficient. More is being done with less. This is an increase in the library's productivity. Being more productive is how increases in wages are justified. It is a good thing. In higher education, we don't often think about our work in these terms, but we should.

¹ Allen Kent, *Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study*, New York: Marcel Dekker, 1979.

² Herman H. Fussler and Julian L. Simon, *Patterns in the Use of Books in Large Research Libraries*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Library, 1961.